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# A Home In The Hills: Examining the Socioeconomic Benefits of Homestay Tourism on Rural Women and Their Communities in the Darjeeling District

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A HOME IN THE HILLS:  
EXAMINING THE SOCIOECONOMIC BENEFITS OF HOMESTAY TOURISM  
ON RURAL WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES IN  
THE DARJEELING DISTRICT

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Fall 2015

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## *I. Abstract*

*Over the last several decades, India has become recognized as a desirable destination for tourists seeking a variety of cultural experiences. The district of Darjeeling located in the northeastern state of West Bengal, which is notorious for its beautiful mountain scenery and world-renowned tea gardens, attracts large levels of domestic and international tourists each year. Recently, a popular trend called “homestay tourism” has emerged in Darjeeling, in which tourists choose to stay in small, family-owned homes rather than in large, commercialized hotels and resorts. This increasing demand for homestays may be explained by recent global social and cultural changes resulting in greater interest and appreciation in cultural heritage, lifestyles and environmental concerns. As a result, homestay ownership has developed as a form of alternative livelihood in both urban and rural areas throughout Darjeeling, with potential for social, cultural, and economic benefits for men as well as women. Previous studies exploring the impacts of tourism on rural communities conclude that the micro- businesses of local homestays provide a multitude of benefits for women, including increased financial stability, employment, improved inter-household relationships, and greater access to various social goods (Hampton, 2003; Anand et al., 2012; Acharya et al., 2013; Mensah et al., 2012). Relying on both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study examined the social, cultural, and economic benefits of rural homestay tourism at the inter-household level in five distinct villages throughout Darjeeling. Using methods of research collection such as personal interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation, I explored the extent to which rural homestays are benefitting women in rural areas, and how they are able to utilize resources allocated from owning homestays. In doing so, I discovered that rural homestays benefit women by providing them with a consistent income, increasing their social upliftment, and by providing a catalyst for socioeconomic improvements within their own communities.*

## *II. Introduction*

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing industries in the world. In 2009, the World Travel and Tourism Council released a report revealing that tourism contributes over 13 trillion U.S. dollars to global revenue, and provides nearly 8.2% of the global population with employment (WTTC). Additionally, tourism is an industry that only continues to grow, and the UNWTO projects international tourism levels to reach 1.25 billion people by 2020. (2010). India has benefitted greatly from the rise of tourism, recognized by both the World Economic Forum and the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report as receiving nearly 7.33% of the world’s total tourists in 2011

(Bhutia, 2014; 240). According to the Indian Ministry of Tourism, tourism alone generated over 6.4 trillion Indian Rs. in 2012, accounting for over 6.6% of the nation's GDP. It also supported nearly 40 million jobs, constituting 12.36% of India's total employment (2014). As a result of this rapid growth throughout India, a diversification of tourism products and destinations has started to take place, which in turn has led to the rise of new, alternative forms of tourism, including small-scale "nature" related and rural tourism.

### *History of Darjeeling as a tourist destination*

A notable case of India's flourishing rural tourism industry is the mountainous region of Darjeeling, located in the northeast Indian state of West Bengal. Known as the "Queen of the Hills", Darjeeling is famous for its picturesque location, quaint "European" hill station atmosphere, and its world-renowned tea industry. The West Bengal Interim Report identified Darjeeling district as "the most highly frequented tourist destination in all of West Bengal", with over 500,000 domestic and 50,000 foreign visitors annually (2012). While the state of West Bengal is ranked as the 6<sup>th</sup> most visited state in India, nearly 87% of those visitors flock to the district of Darjeeling specifically (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2010). When the East India Trading Company first acquired Darjeeling from the kingdom of Sikkim in 1835, the hill station established soon afterwards quickly became commodified as a tourist destination, serving as a mountain retreat for British colonial administrators and their families during the summer. Wealthy residents and high-ranking officials of Calcutta also frequented Darjeeling, which further established its status as "Queen of the Hills". With the growth of the hill station, the entire district of Darjeeling also became a popular base for the exploration of the Eastern

Himalayas, “both for its rich natural history as well as untapped resources and trading networks” (Bhattacharya, 2012; 4). Kenny (2013) argues that Darjeeling is the result of the European “rush” to the hills in the nineteenth century, and reflects the British’s inherent need to “carve a space that was both fresh and clean...like the air found there, as the towns in the ‘plains’ of India had come to be identified with dirt and filth”.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Darjeeling had become the center of and catalyst for transformation of the entire Eastern Himalayan region. During the British colonial period, trade with Nepal and Tibet was encouraged, and Nepali immigration was crucial in the development and sustainability of the labor-intensive tea industry. After India’s independence from British colonial rule in 1947 and Darjeeling’s merging with the state of West Bengal, the area started to experience rapid population growth, mostly in the form of migrants from Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal. The government of West Bengal viewed this influx as an opportunity to capitalize on expanding its tourist industry to generate revenue for the state, and started to expand on pre-existing infrastructure from the British colonial era. Starting in the 1960’s-70’s, new hotels were built, roads were widened, nature parks were constructed and shops and restaurants were established to not only support Darjeeling’s growing population, but also to encourage domestic and international tourism (Besky, 2013). Various modes of industry that had formed during British colonialism such as tea cultivation and handicraft production were encouraged and promoted, in hopes of utilizing Darjeeling’s increasing population to help facilitate incentives for people to visit the region. These initiatives have worked, and Scrase et al. (2015) found Darjeeling district’s population growth to be synchronous with the development of its tourism sector. Between the years of 2001 and 2011, Darjeeling’s total

population increased by 14.77%, from just over 1,609,172 to approximately 1,846,832 (Population Consensus, 2011). In this same time frame, the percentage of tourists visiting Darjeeling has also jumped significantly, from approximately 50,000 total domestic and international tourists in 2000 to over 240,000 in 2011 (West Bengal State Tourism Department, 2014).

### ***Context of tourism in Darjeeling today***

Darjeeling's geographical location at the base of Mt. Kanchenjunga and the eastern Himalayan range is a primary reason for its popularity as a tourist destination today. According to the West Bengal Tourism Department, 42% of Darjeeling's tourists in 2012 reported visiting for rural and adventure tourism, "looking to experience the rural and raw beauty of Northeast India". This supports the findings of Butler and Hall (1998), which conclude that tourists often seek rural destinations offering "pleasant experiences relating to the natural environment, historical heritage, and cultural patterns" (1998; 12). Tourists today visit Darjeeling in search of what Scrase et. al describes as "an authentic Indian experience" (2015), looking to engage more deeply with Darjeeling's people, community, and culture. As a result of this growing desire, two types of tourism that have emerged in Darjeeling: rural and urban. While urban tourism is focused on catering to visitors of the Darjeeling town itself, rural tourism is a relatively new phenomenon, developing and flourishing over the last decade as a way of connecting tourists with rural areas throughout the greater Darjeeling district, while simultaneously empowering those areas socially, culturally, and economically. Lewis et al. identifies tourism as one of the most important tools in development of rural communities, and argues that tourism serves to "sustain and create local incomes, employment, and growth in such regions" (1998).



### ***Research Questions and Objectives***

The most successful development within Darjeeling's rural tourism industry has been that of homestay tourism. Homestays in Darjeeling's rural regions have gained credibility over the last decade as valuable tools in the empowerment of both individuals and communities (Help Tourism, 2014). Homestays have been found to be an important source of income, increase the financial stability of families and communities, contribute to social upliftment, and create a space for increased cultural exposure (Anand et al., 2012; Fotiadis, 2011; Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). A consensus report published by Help Tourism in Siliguri in 2014 estimates there are approximately 800 rural homestays in the Darjeeling district alone, with about 3,600 across the entire northeast of India (Help Tourism, 2014). However, this research is limited because many studies are focused on from male homestay owners, failing to acknowledge how female homestay owners might also be receiving benefits that are both socially and economically valuable to their personal survival, and that of their community. My study examines how rural homestays run exclusively by women in the Darjeeling district are profiting on a socioeconomic level, how these women are able to derive specific personal benefits from the homestay, and how members of their communities are also accessing such benefits.

### ***III. Literature Review***

#### ***Economic benefits of homestay tourism on rural communities***

Advocating for homestays in rural areas has been found to benefit both individual homestay owners and the communities in which they reside. The external economic benefits of rural homestays are evident in a study completed by Anand et. al (2012) on the Indian Himalayan community of Ladakh. Ladakh is a remote mountain community in

the Indian Himalayas, plagued by both poverty and unemployment. The results of Anand's study confirm that residents within a rural community support the implementation of homestays primarily as a means of providing additional income. Ladakh has roughly 270,000 residents, nearly 16% of which were found to be involved in some sort of homestay initiative, but nearly 65% of which were indirectly benefitting from the presence of homestays. The study found that homestays in Ladakh helped in addressing local employment needs, as homestay owners hired members of the community to assist with the daily tasks of running the homestay, such as cooking, cleaning, and collecting firewood. Moreover, the promotion of homestays in Ladakh simultaneously created a space for other small businesses such as shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and restaurants to develop and flourish.

### ***Sociocultural benefits of homestay tourism on rural communities***

Homestays resulting in increased economic stability have also been linked to provide various social benefits other members of rural communities, the extent of which hinges on the level of involvement from the community itself. In a descriptive study examining the introduction and implementation of the Malaysian Homestay program in 2008, homestay tourism was recognized by the Malaysian government as “a catalyst for rural community development, particularly from a socioeconomic perspective” (Razzaq et al., 2011; 1418). Razzaq's study examined 227 Malaysian villages and 140 homestay operators, and found that without any form of proper planning and participation from the larger community, the homestays were destined to fail. Razzaq hypothesizes this is because without community capacity building, there is a lack of human capital, social capital, and organizational structure that is crucial for the survival of the homestay. Thus,

it's vital that a community be actively involved in the implementation and activities of a homestay in order to fully reap its social benefits. Razzaq et al. found these benefits to include cross-cultural exchange of ideas, information and customs, "allowing two parties with different cultural backgrounds to interact and learn from each other" (2011; 1420). A similar study also found homestay projects to "require participation from not just the host family but the whole community, including school children, youth clubs, women's clubs, etc. As a result, the homestay program helps in maintaining the traditional values of teamwork that creates the feeling of togetherness as well as nourishes social values within the community" (Ibrahim, 2012; 19)

### ***Female participation in homestay ownership***

According to the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development) (2000), there has been an increase in women's rural entrepreneurship globally since the early 1980's. Since then, a growing body of work has sought to examine female entrepreneurs in micro-finance enterprises (Baygan 2000, Bruni et al. 2004, Smith-Hunter and Boyd 2004) and many studies have discussed the personal characteristics, business choices, and various socioeconomic barriers to their individual success. In a study completed by Dr. Ajay Sharma et al. from the Uttarakhand Technical University, Indian women are described as "a catalyst in the social and economic development of India...playing an important role in local economies and micro-enterprises" (2012; 126). The study also recognizes entrepreneurship development among rural Indian women on an individual level, highlighting how it "enhances their personal capabilities and increases their decision-making status within the family and community as a whole" (Sharma 2012; 115). Sharma outlines several examples of female self-

generated employment resulting from small-scale enterprise activities that support their households, including herbal marketing, food processing, handicraft making, and tourist homestay operation. Sharma classifies homestays as “micro enterprises”, which “not only enhance national productivity, and generate employment but also help to establish economic independence, and personal and social capabilities among rural women” (120).

De and Devi (2010) argue that rural homestays are expected to provide women with more freedoms and opportunities to work, which results in developing more self-respect, better education, and the attainment of a higher standard of living. After interviews with 32 homestays in the region of Meghalaya, De and Devi found that small, family-run tourism related businesses are beneficial for women because they allow for women to earn extra income and simultaneously improve their social status in and out of the household. Moreover, women were also found to have “improved self confidence, self awareness, increased social interaction and political participation as a result of taking up the responsibility of running a homestay” (De and Devi, 2010; 20). One woman in the study reported that she felt “a change in how [I] carry myself and how I interact with others...I hold my head up and look people in the eye” (De and Devi, 2010; 40). A man interviewed in the same study reported that after opening their family’s homestay, he noticed a significant change in his wife’s behavior and mannerisms: “she moves more confidently now...she feels as though she has a purpose” (42). De and Devi’s study depicts an important shift in rural women’s social and cultural attitudes, which stems from their increased economic stability.

A similar study completed by Acharya and Halpenny (2013) in the rural Western Nepalese community of Barpak found homestay tourism to be an important tool for

strengthening the social and economic capacities of women in lower-income communities by providing them with “a form of economic stability and independence”. Acharya and Halpenny’s study found that women in Barpak have almost exclusively taken over operating small enterprises within the tourism business, such as the running of handicraft and souvenir shops to owning guest and teahouses. Acharya and Halpenny recognize this as a major paradigm shift from in the sociocultural outlook of Nepal, and challenging to the status quo of rural women’s involvement in community development. After examining 21 homestays, Acharya and Halpenny found homestays in Barpak to result in individual identity recognition, as well as gender and ethnic equality for women and other marginalized groups. Moreover, the study also found that the active roles of Barpaki women in the homestay invalidated the long-held assumption that women are only homemakers and caretakers of domestic chores, regarding their involvement as “a cornerstone for emancipation from culturally defined normative and conservative notions of gender identity, roles, and relations” (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013).

An exploratory study by Behara et al. completed in 2012 uncovers Indian women’s motives for becoming entrepreneurial and owning their own small businesses, including homestays. According to Behara, “entrepreneurship is the state of mind which every woman has in her, but has not been capitalized on” (2012; 6). The study focused specifically on female entrepreneurs in Andhra Pradesh, and evaluated the factors responsible for encouraging women to become entrepreneurs in a developing country like India. Results of the study are consistent with those aforementioned, concluding that women pursue small micro-enterprises such as rural homestays to establish their own identity and economic independence, to support their families, and gain an overall sense

of confidence and self-reliance. Results from a survey conducted as part of Behara et al.'s study find that 74% of rural women in Andhra Pradesh consider supporting their families and particularly, their children as the primary reason for becoming entrepreneurs.

***Entrepreneurial women in Darjeeling within the greater Indian context***

Although much of the literature on homestay tourism is focused on framing it as beneficial for women at the inter-household level, this is not always the case. Kishor and Choudhary (2011) emphasize the role of female entrepreneurs on a local level as “*potentially* empowering and liberating *only* if it provides women with an opportunity to improve their wellbeing and enhance their capabilities.” Behara et al. (2012) identifies the biggest obstacle for a rural woman’s entrepreneurial success in India as “the social attitudes and constraints in which she has to live and work...women often suffer from male reservations about their role and capacity” (10). Behara concludes that women working “outside” of the home “in entrepreneurial tourist activities” is seen as disruptive to the deeply rooted traditional sentiments of male breadwinner and female homemaker, with a majority of men feeling as though their masculinity was being challenged by women earning an independent income.

While it’s important to recognize that a majority of female entrepreneurs in India are challenged by the gendered double standards imposed on them by patriarchal society, literature focused on forms of female self-employment in Darjeeling suggests that this issue is not as prominent. In Ishita Mukhopadhyay’s book *The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal*, women were found to “prefer home based self-employment rather than working for the household and being engaged in expenditure-saving activity as unpaid workers” (Economic Empowerment, 77). According to Mukhopadhyay, over

the last twenty years Darjeeling has boasted some of the highest female rural employment rates in all of India, with “the importance of the informal sector with respect to female employment rising significantly, and a 39% net increase in total female workers in Darjeeling” (65). In the chapter entitled Economic Empowerment, Mukhopadhyay notes that female entrepreneurship in Darjeeling is regarded as “a respected position...women who hold jobs that support both the tourist sector as well as their own personal livelihoods are seen as successful, independent, and strong...they are highly regarded in this sense, exercising control over many aspects of small-scale microfinances” (89).

In the course of this study, I did not see the same rigidity of gendered norms and expectations throughout Darjeeling that I had experienced in other parts of India. However, it is still valuable to acknowledge that these limitations and restrictions for women who are self-employed and pursuing independent entrepreneurial enterprises do exist. Moreover, it is also important to consider them when evaluating how the specific case study of rural homestay tourism in Darjeeling fits into the larger narrative of homestay tourism’s benefits on the family unit and women.

## *VI. Methods*

### ***Framework of study***

The primary purpose of this research was to evaluate how rural tourism is positively impacting the socioeconomic status of female homestay owners in the Darjeeling region, with a specific focus on how such benefits are trickling down to the communities of such women. The framework for a majority of the research in this study was done in collaboration with the Association for Conservation and Tourism (ACT), which is based in Siliguri, West Bengal. Under ACT, I worked specifically with an

organization called Help Tourism, which oversees all of the rural tourism activity for the entire northeast region of India. Help Tourism was first established in 1991 as a link between pre-existing forms of livelihood in rural areas of West Bengal and the increasing amount of tourism in the state. Raj Basu, the director of Help Tourism, describes it as “working on the basis of creating enterprise through the movement of rural tourism via small enterprises, utilizing tourism as a tool to promote environmental and cultural preservation” (personal interview, November 17, 2015). Since its formation nearly 25 years ago, Help Tourism has supported the formation and operation of over 3,600 rural homestays throughout all eight northeast Indian states, and has expanded to countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Help Tourism currently supports nine tourist “circuits” throughout northeast India, each circuit encompassing about 8-15 rural villages, containing anywhere between 5-10 homestays (Raj Basu, informal interview, November 17, 2015).

### ***Focused research areas***

With Help Tourism, I was able to identify the four distinct villages in which to conduct my research. The villages were chosen based on population size, amount of homestays run by local women, and location relative to Darjeeling. All four of the villages were located within a 30km radius of Darjeeling town where I was living, so it was fairly easy to coordinate my visits. I visited female-operated rural homestays in the villages of Tumling, Lepchajagat, Lamahatta, and Maneydara. I also included several visits to the Reyso Homestay and Center for Women’s Empowerment in the outer limits of Darjeeling town, to examine how the homestay had grown and evolved as an



organization that focused on providing homestay benefits to various communities of underprivileged women.

### *Formal and Informal interviews*

Fieldwork was conducted through a variety of research methods, including personal interviews, focus group discussions, Likert Scale surveys, and ethnographic observations and experiences. My study relied on quantitative methods of research, and involved active participation and collaboration with community members from the villages of Tumling, Lepchajagat, Maneydara, Lamahatta, and Darjeeling. A majority of the questions involved in my study were descriptive, and one-on-one interviews were utilized as the most appropriate method of collecting data. I began by interviewing Raj Basu at Help Tourism before starting my research, to gain a better understanding of how Help Tourism operates as an organization, its specific focuses and goals, and the various challenges it faces. Much of my research involved formal and informal interviews with female owners of rural homestays, in which I asked them a series of questions regarding their personal experiences owning a homestay, details regarding the guests, costs, and amenities provided by the homestay, certain challenges they faced as owners, how they felt they had personally benefitted from running a homestay, and what community benefits they had also witnessed as a result of their homestay (Appendix A). In total, I conducted 10 formal and 6 informal interviews with female rural homestay owners and women directly involved in rural homestay ownership across five different locations. Respondents were chosen based on recommendations from Raj Basu and from other female homestay owners, using the “snowball method”. I also conducted formal interviews with 7 urban homestay owners in Darjeeling town, both male and female.

Although my study focused on rural homestays, interviews with urban homestay owners were completed at the beginning of my research, and helped to contextualize how the homestay program has become successful in Darjeeling.

### ***Focus Group Discussions***

My study also utilized two focus groups as a method of data collection, which consisted entirely of women. Each focus group required a slightly different set of general questions, the results of which can be found in Appendixes B and C. The first focus group was held in the village of Lepchajagat, and served to examine the benefits of homestays for women at an internal level. This focus group involved 9 village women who were either homestay owners, or involved in the running of a homestay. The second focus group was held in Darjeeling at the Reyso Homestay, and was used to observe how women within a community benefit from the formation of homestays, and how they are able to access and utilize such economic and social opportunities. Ujjawal Chhetri and his mother, Menuka, started Reyso Homestay in 2011 as both a homestay and a pilot women's empowerment project. Reyso, which in Nepali means "strand", currently works with about 40 women from the small, underprivileged areas directly surrounding Darjeeling, providing them with the materials, training, and skills necessary to knit and crochet their own handicrafts and clothing. Reyso then sells the products in Darjeeling town at various retailers, returning nearly 80% of the profit to the women themselves. The income generated from running Reyso Homestay goes towards buying the wool, dye, and needles, necessary for the training and supporting the women. The focus group at Reyso involved 10 women from various small communities surrounding Darjeeling town, including Rose Bank, Shyam Cottage, Ragbari, and Kelyangram.

### ***Ethics***

A majority of my research was completed independently, and most interviews were conducted in English. If the interviewee preferred to have the interview in Nepali or Hindi, a local member of the community helped to facilitate translation. In the village of Lepchajagat, community members Pratiksha and Roshen Tamang facilitated the translation. In the villages of Lamahatta and Maneydara, local community member Prerna Gurung helped to translate. Prior to each personal interview and focus group, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the aims of my research, and were then asked to give either verbal or written consent to participate. They were also advised that the interview could be terminated upon request at any time, and those subjects who did not wish to participate in questioning could remove themselves from the group at any time. Because I was inquiring about relationships between various village members and their experience with tourism in my visit to each site, before conducting the interview or focus group, my research aims and status as a student were made clear, and participants were given an opportunity to first ask me any questions before partaking. I also asked whether respondents wanted to be identified by their real name in the final report, or to remain anonymous. All respondents of interviews chose to be identified by name, so I have done so in the following report.

### ***V. Findings***

#### ***Interviews-Tumling, Lamahatta, Maneydara villages***

This study collected responses from nine formal and seven informal interviews conducted at 14 different homestays with 16 female owners in the villages of Tumling, Lepchajagat, Lamahatta, and Maneydara. The interviews were conversational, starting by

collecting general information about the homestay itself, including its opening date, amount of rooms, guests hosted, and cost per night.<sup>1</sup> The interview questions then shifted to the opening and maintenance of each homestay. The results from personal interviews in Tumling, Lepchajagat, Lamahatta, and Maneydara villages are summarized below.

When asked about their main primary motivation for opening a homestay, women overwhelmingly answered that their motive was the prospect of a reliable source of income. 4 of the women interviewed identified their homestay as currently providing their primary source of income, while 12 said it was their secondary source of income. While 81% of the women interviewed were married with working husbands, many expressed that the income from the homestay was equally important to their survival and wellbeing as their husband's income, although only 6 of them asserted themselves as the sole owners of their homestay. Prior to opening the homestay, many of the women were unemployed, sustaining off of income from agriculture, and handicraft production (S. Sherpa, formal interview, November 23, 2015, S. Tamang, informal interview, November 19, 2015).

The next section of the interview focused on the economic benefits women had experienced since opening the homestay, and its general impact on their perceived standard of living. Sixteen out of 16 women interviewed confirmed increased financial stability as the most immediate, tangible benefit from owning a homestay, with one woman remarking, "Things were quite difficult before actually...we had nothing. My mother struggled to provide for [us]. Things have become much easier for us now that we have this homestay...money is no longer a concern" (M. Gurung, formal interview,

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix D for more specific details on each homestay

November 18, 2014). Moreover, 10 of the women interviewed shared that the income generated from their homestay had significantly improved their standard of living, allowing them to access better food, higher quality clothing, and increasing their level of personal hygiene (K. Gurung, formal interview, November 18, 2015; N. Gurung, formal interview, November 18, 2015). Several women also mentioned better health and wellbeing of their children as a benefit of their income (S. Sherpa, formal interview, November 23, 2015; R. Gurung, informal interview, November 22, 2015; S. Tamang, formal interview, November 19, 2015).

When asked how their income from the homestay was being utilized at the inter-household level, the two most common answers provided in the interviews were on children's education, and covering household expenses, including utilities such as water and electricity, and groceries. 12 of the women interviewed had at least one child between the ages of 6 and 18, all of which were currently enrolled in schools with tuition ranging between 10 and 40,000 rupees a year.<sup>2</sup> Of those 12 women with children, 5 of them were relying solely on their income from the homestay to pay for their children's higher education. Renu Tamang, the owner of Renu's Homestay in Lepchajagat, explained that without the revenue from her homestay, she would not be able to pay for her 18 year old daughter, Pratiksha, to attend nursing school in Darjeeling after completing the 12<sup>th</sup> standard. "Her success is so important to me...that's why I start the homestay" (formal interview, November 19, 2015). Rekha Gurung, the owner of Paahuna Laya Homestay in Maneydara expressed a similar view, stating, "Providing for my daughter's education is the most valuable thing...the homestay has allowed for [this] to

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<sup>2</sup> Values represent information gathered from interviews

happen” (formal interview, November 22, 2015). All 12 of the women interviewed with children communicated that after providing for basic, everyday needs, the education of their children was their most central concern, and expressed that their homestays had helped to alleviate some of their anxiety paying for tuition (various formal and informal interviews).

Women also reported spending income from the homestay on various social projects within their communities. Neela Gurung, the owner of Shikar Lodge in Tumling, was one of the women interviewed without children. However, she still invests a large amount of money she makes from running Shikar Lodge in the care and education of children within her community. Neela is a social studies and Nepali teacher of 20 years at the Shree Sarswati Primary school in Meghma, and spends much of her income from Shikar Lodge on books, clothes, and food for the children she teaches. Neela explained, “Being a teacher, I see how little families have here to support their children’s education...they can barely afford to feed them. Children would show up at school wet, cold, and unhealthy... I knew I needed to do something” (formal interview, November 18, 2015). Neela has been acting as a “foster mother” for local community children for the last ten years, providing them with lodging, food, clothing, and school supplies. Neela has been able to support 12 children in this way thus far, and is currently hosting two more. In exchange for their living expenses, the children help Neela run the homestay, by feeding animals, making chai, and tending to the fire.

Keshari Gurung, the owner of the Mountain Lodge Homestay in Tumling, also does not have children. However, she too is using some of her income from her homestay to finance the education of her nephew, who is 14 years old and attends the St. Centro

School in Darjeeling. Like Neela, Keshari is also involved in various social projects, including her involvement with a local organization called Simag, of which her father was a co-founder. Simag began in 2002, and is a collection of about 32 homes in the Tumling village area, which meet every four weeks to collect donations from its members, and determine how the funds should be distributed for the betterment of the community. Of the 32 homes involved, 12 of them are homestays from the villages of Tumling, Meghma, Loshay, and Garibas. Last year, Sigma raised 25,000 INR, nearly 65% of which was raised by the homestays in the organization alone. The Mountain Lodge donates about 4-500 INR to the organization every month, and has been able to do so for the past 10 years (K. Gurung, formal interview, November 18, 2015).

When asked about how the homestay had impacted them personally on a social level, all of the women in the interviews indicated their homestays had elevated their level of self-confidence. Levels of increased confidence and feelings of pride, accomplishment, and purpose were especially prominent amongst those women who were unmarried, but 5 those women who were married also indicated feeling a sense of ownership and autonomy in their relationship with their husband. 8 of the twelve women with children indicated that succeeding as a female entrepreneur and being self-employed helped them to set a good example, while simultaneously promoting values like ownership and responsibility within their families. 9 of the women reported that they had interest in continuing their homestay for years to come, and 5 of these women indicated already having plans for renovations and extensions.

Interviewees were also asked to comment on whether they considered their homestay to have an impact on the larger community. The women overwhelmingly

answered positively, saying that their homestays had significant positive repercussions within their communities, both social and economically by increasing public awareness and attractiveness of their village as a tourist destination. In all four villages, women noticed that their homestays had helped increase the flow of tourists to the area, most notably in Maneydara and Tumling.

The Paahuna Laya homestay is the first and only homestay in Maneydara, and has been open for a little over a year. In an interview with owner Rekha Gurung, she explained that she thinks the Paahuna Laya Homestay helps “bring more visitors to this area... people are starting to recognize [Maneydara] as a place to visit as they tour Darjeeling” (November 22, 2015). Due to its proximity to Lamahatta village and the famous “Roadside Garden”, funded by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in 2012, Rekha hopes that Maneydara will soon also host tourists looking to visit Lamahatta and Darjeeling hill station. “People will come to enjoy [the garden], but will then discover our village as well... they will enjoy. “The more visitors to the area, the more business for us and better livelihood for everyone” (R. Gurung, formal interview, November 22, 2015). The village of Maneydara is very small, with only about 20 residences and 100 inhabitants. However, its location in the Tukdah tea garden and peaceful atmosphere are enough to attract visitors, with a greater emphasis on food, culture, and the promotion of local materials. “People come and visit us to get away from everyday life”, Rekha explained. “They don’t want the crowds and busy streets... it is so peaceful here, and so they come to experience that” (formal interview, November 22, 2015). Since opening in February 2015, the Paahuna Laya Homestay has hosted 9 guests, 7 of which have come for reasons of rural tourism (P. Gurung, informal interview,



November 23, 2015), The Paahuna Laya is expecting a large group of 7 guests in the month of December- their largest visiting group to date.

Whereas Maneydara is still working towards establishing itself as an eco-tourist destination, the village of Tumling has already achieved this status. In an interview with Neela Gurung, she explained proudly that before Shikar Lodge, people didn't know where Tumling was, and that it wasn't in any guidebooks or featured on any maps. "Now everyone knows," Neela declares. Shikar Lodge hosts approximately 5,000 guests a year, who visit Tumling for trekking, mountaineering courses, wildlife expeditions, and family vacations, contributing nearly 50 lakhs to the local economy (Help Tourism, 2014). The circulation of this extra income has helped to stimulate the Tumling economy, provided funding for the local school, infrastructure such as roads and water pumps, and the opening of new enterprises, such as stores and other guest houses (M. Gurung, formal interview, November 18, 2015).

### ***Lepchajagat Focus Group Discussion***

The village of Lepchajagat is located about 16 kilometers outside of Darjeeling town, and consists of about 30 homes and 180 inhabitants. Of those 30 homes, 12 are homestays, with another 4 currently being renovated to become homestays. All of the existing homestays in Lepchajagat are relatively new, established within the last two to three years as a result of the increasing flow of domestic tourists to the area. Unlike other homestays in Tumling and Lamahatta that receive both domestic and international tourists, homestays in Lepchajagat host tourists primarily from Bangalore and Calcutta, who want to avoid the "crowds and noise of Darjeeling town" (R. Tamang, informal interview, November 18, 2015). The focus group discussion (FGD) consisted of 9 women

from 7 different homestays in Lepchajagat, between the ages of 26 and 57. 8 of the nine women were married, and all nine women had at least one child. 3 of the women had been involved in the homestay industry for over 2 years, while the remaining 6 had only had their homestay for less than one year. Like in the personal interviews, the first few questions were used to generate information and details about the homestays, their costs, amenities, and guests.<sup>3</sup> The discussion then turned to more in-depth, detailed questions concerning how the women had personally benefitted socially and economically from the homestay.

Although 8 of the nine women in the focus group were married, all of them reported having at least one child. When asked if they spent their extra income on the education of their children, women answered in unison that after household expenses, education was the main way in which they spent the income. On average, the women in the FGD estimated spending 60-70% of the income from their homestays on children's education, about 20% on daily household needs, and saving only about 10-20%. Using a Likert Scale, women were then asked to rank the importance of their homestay in terms of ability to pay for their children's education on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not at all important in payment and 5 being absolutely crucial for payment. 8 of the 9 women answered with 5, claiming that without their homestays, paying for children's education would not be possible.

### ***Reyso Homestay Focus Group Discussion***

Conducted later in my study, this FGD sought to better understand how communities surrounding an established homestay were benefitting from its existence. 10

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix D for details on specific homestays

women participated in the discussion, half of which had been involved at Reyso for over 2 years. 9 of the ten women indicated that they were unemployed, and one of them owned their own private enterprises, a small grocery store. 8 of the women were married, and their husbands were employed as laborers, drivers, shopkeepers and one businessman. 6 of the women had children, all of which are currently attending school. All 10 of the women indicated using Reyso as a source of secondary income, and one woman said that using income from her Reyso products, she was able to start her own small grocery store in her village of Ragbari.

The women at Reyso make on average about 300-500 INR a month from the handicrafts they knit at the homestay, which they consider an “important side income”. However, all of the women in the focus group felt that they had benefitted more from the collective nature of Reyso; gaining confidence from the community and camaraderie they felt when at the organization. According to co-founder Menuka Chettri, the power of Reyso as a homestay lies not within the financial opportunities, but within the social platform it provides for women to engage, share, and support one another (FGD November 21, 2015). “Our homestay is a place for women to come and feel empowered *together*”, she explained to me. “Coming together and sharing skills and stories is something that is dying in this world...we need to reintroduce it” (M. Chettri, FGD, November 21, 2015).

## *VI. Discussion and Analysis*

The goal of my study was to discover the extent to which homestay ownership has provided women in rural areas with increased economic benefits and social opportunities. Based on these discoveries, it also sought to understand how such benefits are being

allocated, utilized, and applied at both the inter-household level and within the larger community. The results show a consistent pattern that female homestay owners have experienced what they consider to be very valuable economic and social benefits associated with ownership of their homestay, at both the inter-household level and within the community. Not only have women been able to better provide for themselves and their families, but also some have been allocate various resources to their local communities as well.

***Economic benefits of rural homestays at the inter-household level***

My study found that female homestay owners considered the economic benefits of their homestay to be significant at both the internal and external level. Women in both the interviews and in the Lepchajagat focus group identified an increased income as an individual motivator and a result of owning a homestay. This finding is consistent with those of many pre-existing studies on female homestays, which find that income from homestays has resulted in an increased capacity for families to buy better quality food and material assets such as televisions, liquefied petroleum gas, and vehicles (Anand et al. 2012; Acharya et al. 2013; Budhatoki, 2013). Also in connection with the findings of Behara et al. in Andhra Pradesh (2012), most of the women in my study did not spend any of the income they collected on themselves or for their personal benefit; rather, it was spent on household expenses, bills, taxes, and perhaps most importantly, the education of their children.

Moreover, 12 of the sixteen female homestay owners were married, and considered their homestay to be a shared family enterprise, and something they had been able to pursue with the help of their husband. Sushila Sherpa, owner of the Everest

Homestay in Lamahatta, explained, “The homestay belongs to all of us. It’s a family business...and it benefits the entire family” (formal interview, November 23, 2015).

Rekha, the owner of the Paahuna Laya Homestay in Maneydara said that although she is the owner of the homestay, the income is shared with her husband, who works for 10 months a year in the army (formal interview, November 22, 2015). Based on literature that situates Darjeeling as a matriarchal society where the women are more respected and highly regarded than in other parts of India (Sharma, 2012; Bhan 2014), I was expecting to find that women considered themselves the sole owner and caretaker of their homestay. However, when examining the distribution of finances from each homestay, it became evident that women consider their earnings to be shared amongst their family members, and several reported that they offered financial assistance to immediate family.

***Economic benefits of rural homestays at a community level***

I categorize ways in which women considered the benefits of their homestays to “trickle down” to their communities in two ways: by providing employment for other community members, and by stimulating their local economies by providing business for other small enterprises. In the formal interview conducted with Neela Gurung at the Shikar Lodge in Tumling, she explained that as she has become more successful, she has hired several people from Tumling and neighboring villages to help her run the homestay (formal interview, November 18, 2015). Keshari Gurung at the Mountain Lodge in Tumling also hires local boys to help her run the homestay, giving them tasks such as cutting firewood, transporting guests by taxi, and acting as local tour guides (formal interview, November 18, 2015). “It’s a win-win situation,” Neela explained. “I give them steady employment and in return, they help me run my homestay...I wouldn’t be able to

do this without them”(formal interview, November 18, 2015). However, it’s important to note that women like Neela and Keshari are able to hire local employees to help run their homestays because they have accumulated the economic and social capital necessary to do so. Other homestays I examined such as the Paahuna Laya Homestay and Everest Homestay were less than two years old, and had not experienced the same level of economic success of those homestays in Tumling, and therefore could not afford to hire employees. For example, the Everest Homestay in Lamahatta is only run by Sushila and her husband, because they currently cannot afford to hire any extra help (formal interview, November 23, 2015).

The second way in which the rural homestays I visited are economically benefitting communities is by providing business for small enterprises, such as shops and restaurants. In the village of Lepchajagat, the formation of 6 new homestays in the last 2 years and the increased flow of tourists as a result have prompted the formation of a new store and chai stand in the village. A local family owns the store, and it currently employs 5 people in the village (P. Tamang, informal interview, November 19, 2015). The store sells vegetables, produce, hygiene products and a variety of products available for tourists, such as hot water bags and maps of Darjeeling district. The store has increased business for local farmers and vendors in the area, who now are able to supply to another location (Focus Group Discussion, November 19, 2015). Moreover, the chai stand has resulted in an increase of traffic through Lepchajagat, consisting mostly of tourists traveling from Darjeeling or Mirik. Tourists are able to spend some time in Lepchajagat, enjoy the views, experience the local culture, and will return to stay (R. Tamang, informal interview, November 20, 2015). Thus, small enterprises that have formed to

accommodate the needs of various homestays are also helping refuel the tourist industry in the area.

The formation of rural homestays in small villages has also supported the opening of others in the same area. This phenomenon was most prevalent in the villages of Lepchajagat and Lamahatta. As one homestay in the community becomes successful, others become inspired to open their own homestays as well (Lepchajagat FGD, November 19, 2015). In both Lamahatta and Lepchajagat, the homestay initiative is fairly new, becoming popular over the last 2-3 years as a result of this “mushrooming” effect. In Lepchajagat, four homestays formed within six months of each other, and in Lamahatta, seven within a year (S. Sherpa, formal interview, November 23, 2015; R. Tamang, informal interview, November 19, 2015). However, these homestays do not compete with each other. Rather, they support the growth and success of each other, by recommending other homestays within their village to tourists, or sending guests to other homestays if theirs happens to be full (Lepchajagat FGD, November 19, 2015).

### ***Social benefits of rural homestays at the personal level***

Across all personal interviews and focus groups, women confirmed that they had experienced feelings of social upliftment from their involvement in homestay initiatives. I define “social upliftment” as an increase in levels of individual confidence, self-pride, and autonomy. Literature on the homestay initiative in India has consistently shown that micro enterprise ownership is strengthening levels of female empowerment, self-confidence, and independence (Bhan, 2014; Sharma 2012; Datta & Banerji 2015). My study found that the main source of pride for women is helping to gain recognition and establish “a name” for their village. Women feel more confident and in control because

they are doing something they know will benefit both themselves and their local communities (N. Gurung, formal interview, November 18, 2015; Lepchajagat FGD, November 21, 2015). The responsibilities of operating a homestay also promote feelings of worth and importance as apart of the community. These feelings in conjunction with the predominantly matriarchal society of Darjeeling have created an active, engaged environment in which female entrepreneurship is encouraged and flourishes. Moreover, in cases such as Reyso, homestays also empower women by providing them with the skills and space to succeed and feel accomplished within their own communities and families, while simultaneously earning income.

***Social benefits of rural homestays at the community level***

While all of the female homestay owners recognized how their homestays were contributing to the local economy and the promotion of their village as a tourist destination, I found only those homestays that had been in operation for an extended period of time were able to make a significant social contribution to their community.

The two homestays I visited in Tumling had been open for over 15 years, and both owners had extensive experience in the running and upkeep of a homestay. Not only did these women have the economic stability to be able to extend their benefits to others, but they also possessed the connections and status within the community to be able to do so. For example, Neela Gurung's position as a primary school teacher for over 20 years allowed her to establish relationships with the parents and children in Tumling, and therefore become more familiar with their needs and struggles. Based on these relationships, Neela became inspired to utilize the space and resources from by her homestay to provide food, clothing, lodging, and education of needy children. Moreover,



Neela's physical proximity to the forested regions of Tumling and her experience as a homestay owner has increased her awareness of deforestation in support of the growing tourism industry. As a result, Neela's social work also involves planting rhododendron bushes throughout Tumling, buying materials with money she has earned at Shikar Lodge. So far, Neela has been able to plant over 10,000 bushes in the last 4 years (formal interview, November 18, 2015).

Keshari Gurung was able to become an active and involved member of Simag after her father helped to start the organization in 2002, when Mountain Lodge started to receive more visitors. Keshari estimates that the Mountain Lodge donates about 4-5,000 INR a year to the organization to support the community, underprivileged families, and the local school in Meghma (formal interview, November 18, 2015). My research found the success of the Shikar Lodge and Mountain Lodge within the local tourism industry allows for Neela and Keshari to remain engaged in various levels of social work throughout Tumling. "I couldn't contribute the way I have been able to without this income," Neela explained to me. "The homestay isn't just providing for me anymore...it's providing for many others in Tumling as well" (formal interview, November 18, 2015).

### *VII. Conclusion*

The results of my study are conclusive that female-owned and managed homestays in rural villages throughout Darjeeling district have had enormous socioeconomic benefits for the women involved and running them, many of which have also trickled down to their families and larger communities. Results from focus groups and personal interviews show that on an individual level, the increased financial

opportunities are the most important benefits for women, resulting in an improvement in their standard of living and greater access to resources. Moreover, the study found that paying for children's higher education and covering household expenses are the two major ways in which female homestay owners are utilizing their increased income. Despite their best efforts, there is usually very little leftover for women to spend on themselves, or to put into savings. However, many women interviewed did not consider the income for themselves, but rather for the betterment of their families.

The study also found that socially, the women's levels of self-confidence and pride increased drastically from owning and running a homestay. Women in both personal interviews and focus groups continuously reported that owning a homestay produced feelings of accomplishment, self-worth, and pride. Women also reported that they felt more active and engaged in their local communities being owners of their homestay, and considered themselves to be viewed in a higher regard. Several sites such as Reyso Homestay reported that community women utilized homestays as a place to congregate as a community, share ideas, advice and information, and become more empowered as a group.

The most important finding from my study that contributes to pre-existing literature on rural homestay tourism was that the female homestay owners and those involved in homestay ownership consistently reported that the major benefits of homestays impacted their entire community, rather than just themselves individually. While all the female owners identified a need for an alternative income as their primary motivation for opening a homestay, nearly all of those women also expressed that since opening or beginning their involvement with the homestay, the socioeconomic benefits to

their community outweighed those that they experienced personally. Although this study was originally designed to only examine the inter-household benefits of rural homestays on women, research revealed that in many cases, such benefits “trickle down” and are redistributed within the communities of women as well.

Across a variety of case studies in rural Darjeeling villages, I found homestay implementation to stimulate the local economy by providing employment and business, funding organizations to support local children and underprivileged families, and in one case, promote the preservation and beautification of the environment. Moreover, the homestays served as catalysts for social elevation of the community as well. Case studies from Tumling, Lepchajagat, Lamahatta, and Maneydara all conclude that women viewed their homestays as crucial to the promotion and growth of their village within the expanding tourism industry. However, it’s important to note that extent to which these homestays were able to partake in such social work was directly correlated to how many years the homestay had been in operation. Those homestays that had been open and hosting guests for a longer period of time were better established and interconnected than those who were more new, and therefore better equipped to recognize and address the specific needs of their community.

#### *VIII. Limitations and recommendations for further study*

The most beneficial study on the impact of rural homestay tourism in various communities throughout Darjeeling would be longitudinal, potentially over the course of many years. Because the concept of rural homestay tourism is still new and developing throughout Darjeeling, many of the homestays I visited were only a few years old, and had yet to experience any tangible social, cultural, and economic benefits. I think the

same study completed five or ten years in the future would perhaps yield different results, or show a more complete timeline of how such resources have been allocated and utilized. Moreover, an extended research time period would also allow for the inclusion of more homestays in the study, which would provide a more diversified pool of respondents and interviewees.

As aforementioned, this study was limited in examining the impact of rural homestay tourism in the context of women's empowerment, and focused solely on interviewing female homestay owners. Considering men also run many homestays throughout Darjeeling, further research might be extended to include male participants as well, to gain a more holistic understanding of homestay benefits. Such a study could be exploratory in nature, or it could also be a comparative analysis of various benefits to men and women. Moreover, the extent to which male-run homestays contribute to various social projects within their community as opposed to female-run homestays would also make for an interesting comparison.

Finally, future research may also illicit more consistent and reliable results if a local community member conducted it. My identity and presence as a Western student in such rural areas may have affected the responses given in the interviews and focus groups. Moreover, I recognize that in the process of translation, some information may have been lost or misinterpreted. Thus, having an Indian person or a local community member conducting the interview instead would have perhaps closed the translation gap.

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*X: Appendix*

Appendix A: General Interview Questions

1. How long have you been running/ operating your homestay?
2. Why did you open your homestay?
3. Are you the sole or partial owner of your homestay?
4. How many visitors do you receive each year?
5. What is the cost per head/night at your homestay?
6. What amenities are guests provided with?
7. How many rooms do you have in your homestay?
8. How many guests can you accommodate?
9. Is the income generated from the homestay your primary or secondary income?
10. How do you utilize the income generated from the homestay?
11. Do you feel as though you have benefitted economically from running the homestay? If yes, in which ways?
12. Do you feel as though you have benefitted socially from running the homestay? If yes, in which ways?
13. What kinds of feelings do you experience from running the homestay?
14. Do you feel as though benefits of a homestay are more concentrated at the individual level or the community level?
15. Tell me about some challenges you face running a homestay?
16. Plans for the future of the homestay?



Appendix B: Lepchajagat Village  
Focus Group Questions

1. How many of you are the sole owners of your homestay? Partial owners?
2. How long have you had your homestay?
3. Why did you open your homestay?
4. Average amount of visitors/year to homestay?
5. Charge per night/head?
6. Number of rooms in your homestay?
7. Income generated from homestay? If so, how much?
8. Uses of the income generated?
9. Marital status?
10. Children? If so, how many?
11. Feelings experienced from running the homestay?
12. Do you hope to continue running the homestay in the future? If so, why?
13. Do you feel that running the homestay has economically benefitted you? If so, how?
14. Do you feel that running the homestay has socially benefitted you? If so, how?

Appendix C: Reyso Homestay, Darjeeling  
Focus Group Questions

1. How long have you been coming to Reyso Homestay?
2. Why do you come to Reyso Homestay?
3. Where do you live?
4. Are you employed? If so, what do you do?
5. Marital status?
6. Children? If so, how many?
7. Do you make an income from making products at Reyso Homestay? If so, how much income do you make?
8. If you make an income, how do you spend it?
9. Do you feel that your involvement with Reyso Homestay has improved your standard of living? If so, why?
10. Do you feel that participating in the Reyso Homestay benefits you? If so, in what ways does your involvement benefit you?
11. If there are benefits, do you feel they are more economical or social?
12. Do you enjoy coming to the Reyso Homestay? Why or why not?
13. Will you continue to come and participate in the Reyso Homestay initiative? Why or why not?

## Appendix D: Specific details on each homestay visited

Homestay	Owner	Location	Open	Guests/ year	Type of guest
Shikar Lodge	Neela Gurung	Tumling	1993	5,000	domestic & international
Mountain Lodge	Keshari Gurung	Tumling	1992	3,500	domestic
Renu's Homestay	Renu Tamang	Lepchajagat	2013	15-20	domestic
Alicia's Homestay	Pasang Tamang	Lepchajagat	2012	15-20	domestic
Lepchajagat View Homestay	Sabita Tamang	Lepchajagat	2012	30-35	domestic & international
Pakhrin Homestay	Pakhrin Tamang	Lepchajagat	2013	N/A	domestic
Kachen Kanya Homestay	Ranjita Tamang	Lepchajagat	2014	N/A	domestic
Paahuna Laya Homestay	Rekha Gurung	Maneydara	2014	8	domestic
Everest Hut Homestay	Sushila Sherpa	Lamahatta	2012	40-50	domestic
Reyso Homestay	Meuka Chettri	Rose Bank	2014	N/A	domestic
Classic Guest House	Reemona Singh	Darjeeling	2000	1,000	domestic & international
Samir's Homestay	Padma Pradhan	Darjeeling	2012	25	domestic & international
Nestle Homestay	Marmit Simick	Darjeeling	2012	125	domestic & international
Seri's Homestay	Prabal Limbu	Darjeeling	2008	10	domestic & international

Homestay	# rooms	# accommodated	Cost/head (INR)	Annual Income (INR)
Shikar Lodge	13	64	1,000	65,000
Mountain Lodge	6	22	1,500	50,000
Renu's Homestay	1	4	800	13-16,000
Alicia's Homestay	6	18	800	12-15,000
Lepchajagat View Homestay	4	14	1,000	40-45,000
Pakhrin Homestay	8	24	1,000	N/A
Kachen Kanya Homestay	4	8	750	N/A
Paahuna Laya Homestay	4	8	600	10-12,000
Everest Hut Homestay	4	15	1,000-2,500	36-60,000
Reyso Homestay	3	10	N/A	N/A
Classic Guest House	4	10	2500-3,500	6,000,000
Samir's Homestay	2	4	1,500-2,000	25-30,000
Nestle Homestay	3	9	1,600-1,900	20-35,000
Seri's Homestay	2	6	1,500	N/A





